Infancy of Zeus, by Jacob Jordaens, early 1630s (Louvre Museum)

In Greek mythology, **Amaltheia** (Greek: Ἀμάλθεια) is the most-frequently mentioned foster-mother of Zeus.

Etymology

The name *Amaltheia*, in Greek "tender goddess", is clearly an epithet, signifying the presence of an earlier nurturing goddess,[1] whom the Hellenes, whose myths we know, knew to be located in Crete, where Minoans may have called her a version of "Dikte".[2]

Mythology

There were different traditions regarding Amaltheia.[3] Amaltheia is sometimes represented as the goat who nurtured the infant-god in a cave in Cretan Mount Aigaion ("Goat Mountain"),[4] sometimes as a goat-tending nymph[5] of uncertain parentage (the daughter of Oceanus,[6] Helios,[7] Haemonius,[8] or—according to Lactantius—Melisseus[9]).[10] The possession of multiple and uncertain mythological parents indicates wide worship of a deity in many cultures having varying local traditions. Other names, like Adrasteia, Ide, the nymph of Mount Ida, or Adamanthea, which appear in mythology handbooks,[11] are simply duplicates of Amaltheia.

In the tradition represented by Hesiod's *Theogony*, Cronus swallowed all of his children immediately after birth. The mother goddess Rhea, Zeus' mother, deceived her brother consort Cronus by giving him a stone wrapped to look like a baby instead of Zeus. Since she instead gave the infant Zeus to Adamanthea to nurse in a cave on a mountain in Crete, it is clear that Adamanthea is a doublet of Amalthea. In many literary references, the Greek tradition relates that in order that Cronus should not hear the wailing of the infant, Amalthea gathered about the cave the Kuretes or the Korybantes to dance, shout, and clash their spears against their shields.[12]

The aegis

Amaltheia's skin, or that of her goat, taken by Zeus in honor of her when she died, became the protective aegis in some traditions.

Among the stars

"Amaltheia was placed amongst the stars as the constellation Capra—the group of stars surrounding Capella on the arm (*ôlenê*) of Auriga the Charioteer."[13] *Capra* simply means "she-goat" and the star-name *Capella* is the "little goat", but some modern readers confuse her with the male sea-goat of the Zodiac, Capricorn, who bears no relation to Amaltheia, no connection in a Greek or Latin literary source nor any ritual or inscription to join the two. Hyginus describes this catasterism in the *Poetic Astronomy*, in speaking of Auriga, the Charioteer:

> Parmeniscus says that a certain Melisseus was king in Crete, and to his daughters Jove was brought to nurse. Since they did not have milk, they furnished him a she-goat, Amaltheia by name, who is said to have reared him. She often bore twin kids, and at the very time that Jove was brought to her to nurse, had borne a pair. And so because of the kindness of the mother, the kids, too were placed among the constellations. Cleostratus of Tenedos is said to have first pointed out these kids among the stars.
>
> But Musaeus says Jove was nursed by Themis and the nymph Amaltheia, to whom he was given by Ops, his mother. Now Amaltheia had as a pet a certain goat which is said to have nursed Jove.[14]

See also

- Auðumbla, primeval cow in Norse mythology who nourished the primordial entities Ymir and Búri
- Romulus and Remus, suckled by a she-wolf

Notes

1. "...the business of Amaltheia, caves and the nurturing of Zeus lands us squarely in Minoan times", John Bennet remarked in passing (Bennet, "The Structure of the Linear B Administration

at Knossos" *American Journal of Archaeology* **89**.2 [April 1985:231–249] p. 107 note 39); cf. M.P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion* (1950:537ff).

2. An Egyptian inscription of Amenhotep III (1406–1369 BCE) discussed by Michael C. Astour, "Aegean Place-Names in an Egyptian Inscription" *American Journal of Archaeology* **70**.4 (October 1966:313–317), "shows that the Egyptian scribe conceived the Minoan form of *Diktê* as the Northwest Semitic word *dqt*... *Aigaion oros=Diktê* may well be a Graeco-Semitic doublet, for in Ugaritic ritual texts *dqt* (literally 'small one') was the term for 'female head of small cattle for sacrifice' and a goat rather than a sheep. *Dqt* is also found as a divine name in a Ugaritic list of gods, which reminds us of the goat that nourished Zeus in the Dictaean cave." (p. 314).
3. See Smith, "Amaltheia" .
4. Hesiod, *Theogony* 484 .
5. For the primitive Amalthea as the goat rather than the goat-herding nymph, see R. W. Hutchinson, *Prehistoric Crete* (1962:202).
6. Hyginus, *Fabulae* 182 (Smith and Trzaskoma, p. 158 . An outdated Latin text of Hyginus' *Fabulae* has *Althaea*, see Smith and Trzaskoma, p. 191 endnote to 182 ; West, p. 133); Smith, "Amaltheia" , which cites Schol. *ad Hom. Il.* 21.194 .
7. Gee, pp. 131 –132 , which cites the epitome of Eratosthenes *Catasterismoi* 13.
8. Apollodorus, 2.7.5 .
9. The early fourth-century Christian apologist Lactantius (*Institutiones* I.22) makes the father of Amalthea and her honey-providing sister Melissa, a Melisseus, "king of Crete"; this example of the common Christian Euhemerist interpretation of Greek myth as fables of humans superstitiously credited with supernatural powers during the passage of time does not represent the actual cultural history of Amalthea, save in its synthesised reflection of an alternative mythic tradition, that infant Zeus was fed with honey: see Bee (mythology).
10. According to Aratus of Sicyon, the Achaeans believed that his happened in their capital Aegium (Strabo, *Geography*, VIII 7,5). Legendary infancy episodes of some historical figures—and poetical figures, such as Longus' Daphnis—were suckled by goats, and the actual practice lingered in Italy into the nineteenth century: see William M. Calder, III, "Longus 1. 2: The She-Goat Nurse" *Classical Philology* **78**.1 (January 1983:50–51).
11. Bernard Evslin, *Gods, Demigods and Demons: A Handbook of Greek Mythology*: *s.v.* "Adamanthea", "Amalthea"; Patricia Monaghan, *Encyclopedia of Goddesses and Heroines*, 2009, *s.v.* Adamanthea".
12. Kerenyi, p. 94.

13. Theoi Project: "Amaltheia"
14. Theoi Project: on-line complete text in English translation

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